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GRADUATING MBA STUDENTS AT UD TACKLE REAL-WORLD CONSULTING PROJECTS

DAYTON, Ohio — Joe Schenk likens the consulting projects performed by his class of MBA students to services provided by professionals from top firms, with just two exceptions. "The difference is six months and \$150 an hour," he said, noting the length of time until graduation and a typical consulting rate.

Once they complete the capstone consulting class of the University of Dayton MBA program, students graduate with the expertise gained in working with real-life clients responsible for at least \$2 million in annual revenue. Working in teams, students take on projects that range from marketing analysis to forming complete business strategies. Company officials open their records and invest their time, but the service from the MBA students is free.

Most of the current members of the capstone class received their MBA degrees Saturday, Dec. 19, in ceremonies at UD Arena.

As part of the arrangement, student teams analyzed current business strategies as well as the competitive market to make recommendations for the company or business unit. They also focused on whatever particular analysis the company specified.

"One team looked at NCR's customer education unit to see what they could do to double the size of their revenue over the next three to five years," Schenk said. "Heapy Engineering wanted the team to do a complete strategy review, and Reynolds and Reynolds wanted to look at projections of the future of online car buying."

Reynolds and Reynolds has partnered with Microsoft for CarPoint, the most-visited Web site for online car purchasing. Reynolds and Reynolds packages the service for the dealers who provide quotes on cars as described by the online shoppers. The dealers get leads for sales, online customers get the cars they want for what they consider is a fair price and Reynolds and Reynolds enhances its relationship with its customers, the dealers, said Debra Bartman, a project manager in the MIS department in Reynolds and Reynolds' automotive division.

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She's not involved with CarPoint as an employee, but she is as an MBA student. She was one member of the five-woman team investigating the business potential of the service. "Things are hot," she said. "From our study, this is a really good service for the future."

Bart Grunenwald also analyzed his employer. "It's a definite advantage for our group that I'm an employee of Heapy Engineering," he said. "It's helped us be more efficient. It's a complicated industry because it's built on relationships."

The company requested analysis of its marketing efforts and recommendations for future development, which gave Grunenwald, a mechanical engineer, a close-up look at a different aspect of the business. "It takes me out of my job description and lets me look at things I typically don't work on," he said. "So I gain from it professionally."

Rob Leaming, a cost analyst for Iams, helped Communicore, a specialist for corporate meetings, with marketing and sales strategy development. "The biggest thing about this class is it's a real-world learning experience as opposed to a theoretical one," he said. "You can't simulate in a book what you get with real clients who have real personalities and with real questions you can ask and get real answers."

In many cases, companies heed what the students say.

The Antioch Co. in Yellow Springs, a client several years ago, followed the advice given by its team of MBA students and made a \$500,000-plus investment in equipment, according to Lee Morgan, CEO of the company. As a result, rather than buy from vendors, the company now produces many of its own stickers for Creative Memories, a national supplier for scrap books and accessories. "Members of the team did the legwork, did the presentation and were instrumental in selling the management group on the idea, which helped free up the investment," Morgan said. Sales of stickers in November for the Antioch Co. reached \$167,000.

"It was very detailed, a very specific project, with cost, payback and revenues projects. It was a professional level of service," he said.